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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000974

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [BA](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAIN/IRAN TONE DOWN RHETORIC

REF: MANAMA 949

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (SBU) Bahrain's King Hamad telephoned Iranian President Khatami July 8 to thank him for his statement that Iran was not threatening any Gulf states following the publication of a cartoon in a Bahrain newspaper June 30 that was deemed insulting to Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei (reftel). The phone call apparently brings to an end a minor tempest between the two countries that underscores Bahrain's hypersensitivity towards its relations with Iran (and its concern about Iran's influence in the Shia community in Bahrain).

2. (C) The June 30 cartoon in the pro-government Arabic daily Al-Ayam depicted an Iranian ayatollah wearing glasses with his beard crossing in an upward zigzag over a chart entitled "2005 Iranian elections." Minister of Information/MFA MinState Abdul Ghaffar told the Ambassador that he did not think the cartoonist specifically meant to caricature Khamenei, but acknowledged that it would have been better if the depicted ayatollah had not been wearing glasses (many here considered the glasses to be the giveaway that Khamenei was the intended target).

3. (C) Reaction to the cartoon among Bahrain's Shia community was sharp and critical, and Iran's Ambassador in Bahrain quickly called on Abdul Ghaffar to lodge a protest. Abdul Ghaffar told us he advised the Iranian Ambassador that he would not accept the protest, telling him that Al-Ayam was not a government paper and the two governments should not rush in with protests every time a newspaper publishes something the other country does not like. Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi then issued a statement during his regular weekly news conference saying Iran had warned Bahrain that "the countries of the region must know that they will suffer more than us from this kind of action, as the abilities of the different countries are not comparable." This comment was viewed as a threat in Bahrain, and GCC Secretary-General Al-Attia criticized the statement in an interview with the Kuwait news agency. King Hamad expressed his concern to the Ambassador in a meeting on July 5 (reftel).

4. (C) On July 6, President Khatami issued a statement denying that any threats had been made to any Gulf country. "I never saw any threat from the declarations of Hamid Reza Asefi," he stated. "It is a misunderstanding. We have friendly relations with all Arab and Islamic countries." At that point, Abdul Ghaffar said, the King decided to call Khatami in an effort to calm the situation down (both with Iran and with what Abdul Ghaffar called Iran's fifth column in Bahrain). "In general, we don't want tensions with Iran," Abdul Ghaffar stated.

MONROE